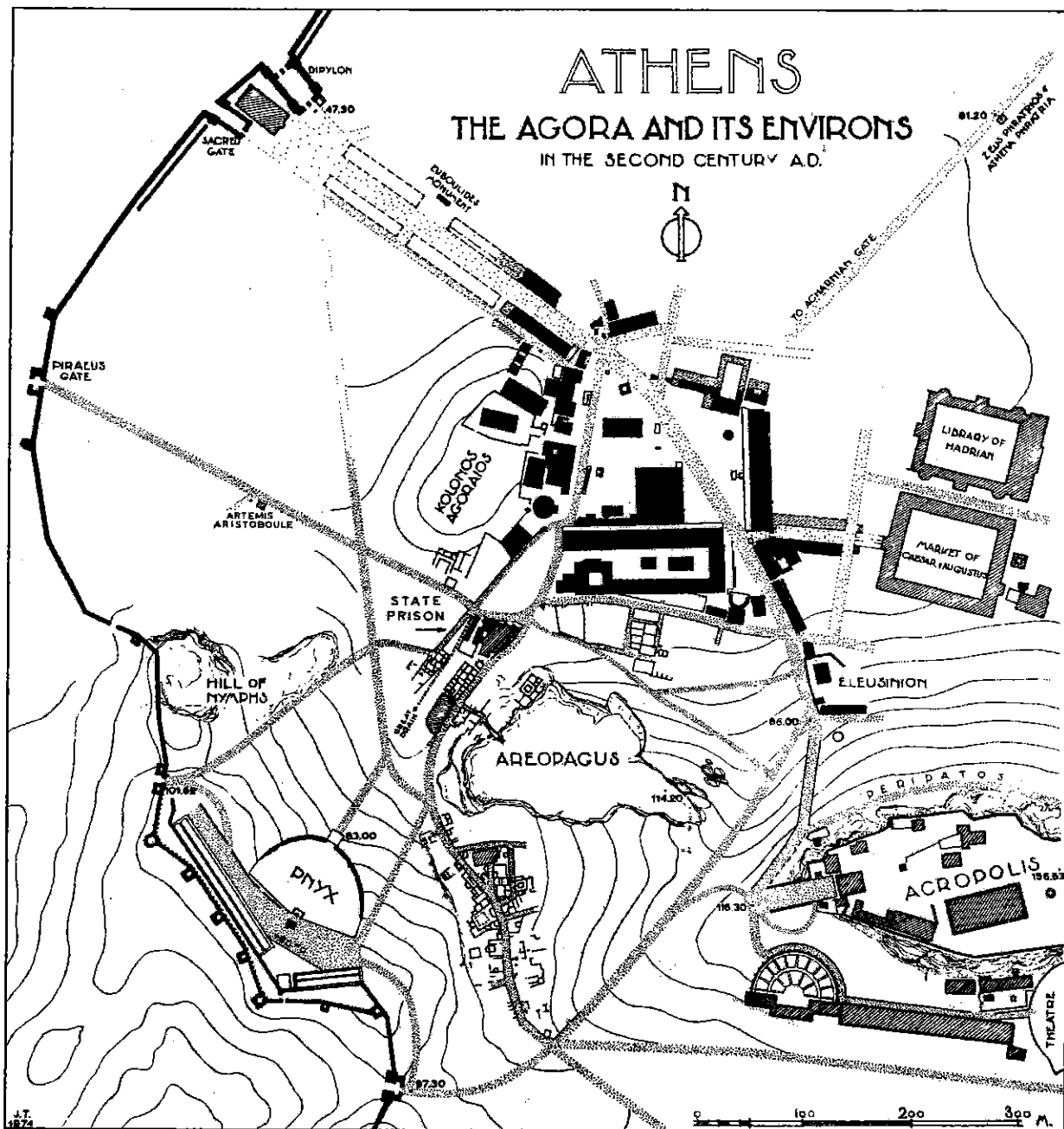


## Athens: The Agora and its Environs



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## Athenian Democracy at Work

### Background Information

Athenian government in the fifth century B.C. was perhaps the first true **democracy**. The government was of the people and for the people, like ours, but it was also **by** the people to a much greater degree than the large **representative** democracies of modern times. But their definition of the "people" was far narrower than ours today, excluding everyone but free adult males. In Athens, all male citizens from the age of 18 were expected by law to participate in the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government. We rely on elected politicians to run our government for us, but we have a far broader electoral base.

To a considerable extent, this **direct, participatory democracy** was a function of the relatively small size of the population. Athens at that time had approximately 300,000 inhabitants, about 100,000 of whom were unenfranchised slaves and 100,000 of whom were unenfranchised women. About 15,000 to 20,000 inhabitants were **metics**, or resident aliens. Out of the 100,000 or so males left, perhaps 50,000 or 60,000 were over the age of 18. This limitation of political rights makes participation much more feasible than in the mass societies of the twentieth century.

The supreme political body was the Athenian **Assembly**. It was open to all free males over 18 whose mother and father were Athenian. All males falling into this group were citizens, regardless of income or class, and every male citizen was subject to universal political service as well as universal military training. The Assembly met about 40 times per year at the **Pnyx**, (see Illustration One), a natural **amphitheatre** on one of the hills west of the Acropolis. Their main task was to enact legislation. Attendance was normally about 2,000 or 3,000 men, for it was difficult to take four days per month off from work. Mostly craftsmen and artisans attended the assemblies, farmers being too busy and aristocrats seeing it as beneath their station in life. Usually a summons and an agenda had to be posted at least 5 days before a meeting.

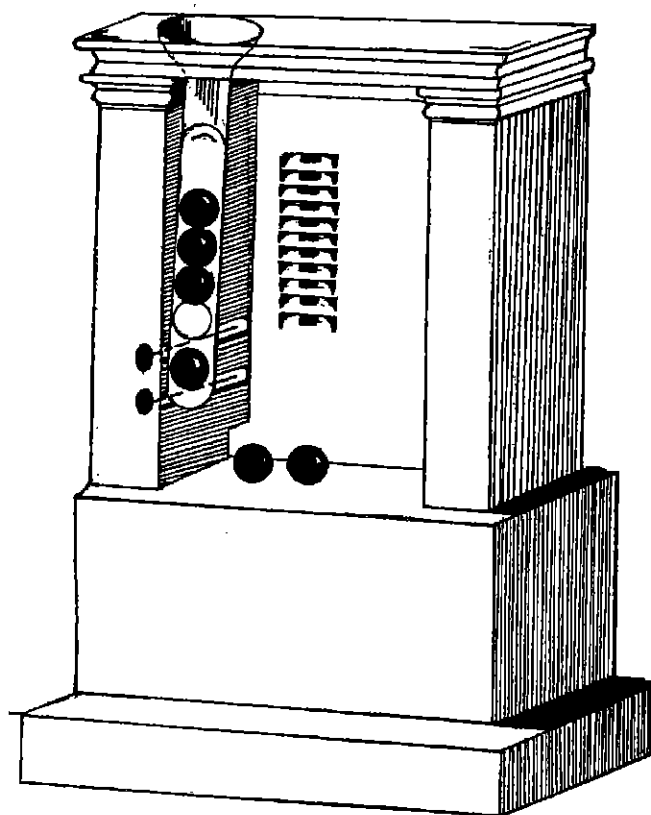
Meetings convened at dawn and the sometimes reluctant citizens were swept up from the **Agora**, (See "Athens: The Agora and its Environs" on page 28), by slaves holding the ends of a long rope wet with red paint, which would mark their clothes and thus make liable for a fine anyone who lingered or attempted to escape the call of duty. Once in the Pnyx, voting was usually taken by a show of hands. This prevented secrecy and encouraged people to follow group leaders in their choices.

In addition to votes on many specific matters, the assembly set aside 9 scheduled meetings per year in which members would approve or disapprove of how magistrates were handling their jobs. They would dismiss them for mismanagement of funds, etc. After all normal business was finished, the Assembly voted on the measures initiated by the **Council of 500**, called the **Boule**.

The Council of 500 prepared the official agenda for the meetings of the Assembly. The Council was made up of 50 men selected from each of the ten Attic tribes. These tribes corresponded to local villages or territories and were of different sizes. Council members were chosen by lot from a list of volunteers, all of them being male citizens over 30 years of age. A Council member could serve only two years in his lifetime, and only one year at a time. They were always paid for their services, which helped to compensate for lost wages on their jobs.

The way in which Council members, jurors, and office holders were chosen is called **allotment** or **sortition**. In the fifth century B.C. this was often done by placing a number of white and black beans in a box equal to the number of candidates who volunteered. The white beans would match the number of offices to be filled and the black beans would match the extra candidates. Each candidate would reach in to the receptacle and pull a bean out, white indicating that he was chosen and black that he was not. This system guaranteed absolute fairness in the selection of council members, jurors or office holders. In the fourth century B.C. much more elaborate voting machines were developed, but they followed the same random principle.

Allotment Machine



Illustrated by  
Carole Collier Frick

The 50 members selected from each tribe acted as a unit in the Council and held the collective presidency (called the **Prytany**) of the Council for one-tenth of the year. This reduced the amount of time men had to be away from work. The members of the Prytany met every day and in effect **administered** the government. The Prytany changed 10 times a year and its chairmanship changed daily. Thus 365 citizens each year would serve as head of state: an adult male, if he lived long enough, would have a good chance of holding the highest office. The Prytany prepared legislation, tried magistrates accused of misdeeds, and inspected cavalry and ships.

By rotating the Prytany every tenth of a year, by not allowing anyone to sit on the Council for more than one year and through the system of allotment, no man was in office long enough to entrench himself and to establish a following. However, in reality, the 10 generals representing the 10 tribes could be reelected year after year and they often were. In addition, they were voted in by ballot, not by the random drawing of beans. Thus they played a continuing role in nonmilitary affairs and they did establish a strong following.

As you can see, the Athenian system of direct democracy was not perfect. Another serious flaw was its extensive reliance on slavery. Many craftsmen, farmers and shopkeepers who participated in the Council and the Assembly had slaves to do their work while they were away running the government. This dependence on slaves allowed free men the time to participate actively in their government and to perform their naval service. Perhaps in this context we should raise the question of whether or not modern representative democracy is more just than the direct democracy of ancient Athens.

You have read about the Persian Wars and about Xerxes' planned invasion at Salamis. Please read the following bill which was passed by the Assembly putting into effect the plan of Themistocles, the Athenian general, for the defense of Athens. Keep in mind that this bill had to be proposed and approved in the manner described above. Also, take note of the attention paid to justice in the selection of **trierarchs, marines, archers and complements** for the ships. (See Document B.)

### The Themistocles Decree

(Primary Source)

Gods. Resolved by the Council and the People. Themistocles, the son of Neokles from Phrearrhoi, made the motion.

The city shall be committed to Athena, the guardian of the Athenians, and to all the other gods to guard against and ward off the barbarian on behalf of the land; and all the Athenians and the foreigners living at Athens shall deposit their children and women at Troezen...; and they shall deposit their elders and property on Salamis; and the treasurers and the priestesses shall remain on the Acropolis to protect the possessions of the gods.

All the other Athenians and foreigners who are of age shall embark on the two hundred ships that have been made ready and ward off the barbarian on behalf of their own freedom and that of the other Greeks together with the Spartans, Corinthians, Aiginetans and the others who are willing to share in the risk; and beginning tomorrow the generals shall appoint two hundred trierarchs, one to each ship, from those men who possess land and a house at Athens and have legitimate children and are not more than fifty years old, and they shall assign ships to them by lot; and they shall enlist marines, ten to each ship, from those between the ages of twenty and thirty years of age and four archers; and they shall assign by lot these units whenever they allot the trierarchs; and the generals shall write the names of the rest of the crews on whitened boards, the Athenians being drawn from the deme registers, and the foreigners from those registered with the polemarch; and they shall list by name those who have been assigned to two hundred crews, one hundred men per ship, and they shall note at the head of the list of each crew the name of the trireme, its trierarch and its specialists in order that each crew may know onto which trireme it should embark. When all the crews have been formed and assigned by lot to the triremes, the Council and the generals shall man all two hundred ships after making a propitiatory sacrifice to Zeus the All-Powerful, Athena, Victory, and Poseidon the Securer.

When the ships have been manned, one hundred of them shall go to Euboean Artemisium and one hundred shall take up station around Salamis and the rest of Attica and defend the land. In order that all Athenians may be of one mind in warding off the barbarian, those who had been exiled for ten years shall go away to Salamis and they shall remain there until the People decide about them and the disenfranchised. . . .

Source: Russell Meiggs and David M. Lewis, *A Selection of Greek Historical Inscriptions to the End of the Fifth Century B.C.* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), pp. 48-49. Translation by Stanley M. Burstein.